

5. TEACHING AND ASSESSING WRITING SKILLS

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5.1. Introduction

Learning to write is usually one of the most difficult tasks a foreign language student has to cope with. Even native speakers at university level very often experience serious difficulties in showing a good command of writing. Language teachers, then, tend to include writing skills in their foreign-language syllabus because they consider these skills essential for their students' academic success. But, what is the real value of writing?



Activity 1

*Why should we include writing activities in a language course?
Choose the three most important reasons.*

- a) Writing reinforces the grammatical structures.
- b) Writing helps our students to learn vocabulary.
- c) Writing can also play a role in many of the activities in which the goal is oral production, reading comprehension, etc.
- d) Writing exercises consolidate language already presented and practiced orally.
- e) Students have to develop the skills of communicating in writing.
- f) Students need writing for study purposes (to record and review vocabulary words and structures that the teacher writes on the blackboard).

Using Peter Wingard's terminology, we should emphasise two basic aspects of the learning and teaching written English:

i) **Writing as a channel** of foreign language learning: it reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that our students have been learning. Thus, some writing exercises might be introduced to consolidate language already presented and practiced orally.

ii) **Writing as a goal** of foreign language learning: students will have to communicate with other people in writing, that is why we could include some writing tasks (which have whole pieces of communication as their outcome, rather than isolated sentences) to help learners develop the skills of communicating in writing. This is something they might need in their future social, educational, personal, or professional lives, when they have to fill out forms, write letters (formal, informal) and postcards, give written instructions, take down notes, write telephone messages, etc.

These two aspects are sometimes inseparable, and a written task could contribute to both of them. However, different written exercises might have different purposes or emphasise one aspect more than the other. And though it is important to work at the sentence level and reinforce grammar and vocabulary, especially with beginners, students should also benefit from writing whole texts which form connected and contextualised pieces of communication, even at the lower levels of learning.



Activity 2

What do writers need to actually produce a piece of writing (clear, fluent and effective communication of ideas)?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

If one of the goals of the English teacher is to enable students to produce fluent, accurate and appropriate written English, there are a number of aspects which need to be considered.

i) **Purpose.** Traditionally, there have been four types of writing: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, and expository; now, some authors discuss other forms of written discourse, such as expressive, persuasive, literary, and referential. Whatever the labels used, there should always be a clear purpose or reason for writing. Teachers have to keep this in mind when planning writing tasks. They should provide a context and a purpose to the writing activity. Instead of asking students, for instance, to «Write a short composition about what you did in your summer holidays», without any particular context, we could elicit a more authentic text if we ask them to answer a letter from a friend asking about the summer holidays. Here the purpose of the writing task is clearer and more life-like.

ii) **Audience.** Writing with a purpose means writing to an audience. If in real life we usually write something with a particular type of reader in mind, it is important that students also consider their audience when they write in class. The writing task should specify not only **why** they are writing, but also **for whom**. It is evident that the description of a town we could find in a tourist guide is different from the one they can write in a letter to a friend. Both content and style may vary according to the context set by the teacher. In this connection, we could also point out that students should be encouraged to write for real audiences, either outside the classroom (institutions, penfriends, newsletters) or inside, writing to other students.

iii) **Content.** If writers are concerned about their audience, they should develop the content clearly and convincingly. The ideas should be relevant and deal with the topic or purpose suggested, without including unnecessary material or losing track of their subject. They also have to link ideas and information across sentences to develop their topic.

iv) **Organization.** These ideas should be organised in a logical and coherent order. The reader will appreciate a careful and efficient structure of the text, avoiding repetitions, unrelated ideas or deficient illustration. If it is a letter, for instance, the conventions of layout and organization are essential. Careful planning is very important to organise the text properly.

v) **Grammar and vocabulary.** The writer's use of language should also be accurate, paying special attention to the rules for verbs, articles, pronouns, prepositions, sentence structures, word order, and so on. Moreover, they need to be careful about distracting errors in word usage, due to apparent similarity to words in Spanish or because a dictionary is wrongly or insufficiently consulted. With attentive editing many mistakes can be avoided.

vi) **Mechanics and presentation.** Punctuation and spelling are also essential elements, together with clear writing, margins, and consistent indentation.

5.2. Ways of teaching writing

Generally speaking there have been two basic ways of teaching writing skills in second and foreign language courses: the product-focused approach and the process approach. Let us briefly examine the main principles and techniques of both approaches. These schematic ideas are taken from the more extensive description given by J. C. Richards in the sixth chapter of *The Language Teaching Matrix*.

THE PRODUCT APPROACH

Principles:

- i) The teaching of second language writing has often been synonymous with the teaching of grammar or sentence structure.
- ii) This view of writing reflects the principles of audiolingual theory which saw writing as the written form of spoken language.
- iii) At more advanced levels, students will learn how to «write an essay on X».
- iv) Correct sentence structure is an essential component of writing; grammatical skills receive considerable emphasis.
- v) Errors in writing are avoided by providing learners with models to follow.
- vi) Students do not usually learn from their mistakes.

Techniques:

- i) Providing models to which learners make minor changes and substitutions.
- ii) Expanding an outline or summary.
- iii) Constructing paragraphs from frames, tables, and other guides.
- iv) Producing a text through answering a set of questions.
- v) Sentence combining: developing complex sentences following different rules of combination.

THE PROCESS APPROACH

Principles:

- i) This approach starts from an examination of what good writers actually do as they write.
- ii) Writing activities should reflect a focus on the different stages in the writing process: planning, drafting and revising.
- iii) New role of learners: they assume greater control over what they write, how they write it, and the evaluation of their own writing
- iv) New role of teachers: they act as facilitators, organizing writing experiences that enable the learner to develop effective composing strategies.
- v) Students should produce complete (not isolated sentences), contextualised pieces of writing.
- vi) Emphasis on *why* the writing is being done (a sense of purpose) and *who* it is being written for (a sense of audience).
- vii) Students should spend classroom time on writing (not just a homework activity).
- viii) Group composition: at each stage of the activity the group interaction contributes in useful ways to the writing process.

Techniques:

- i) In the planning stage: brainstorming, free association, word mapping, ranking activities, quickwriting.
- ii) In the drafting stage: elaboration exercise, reduction exercise, jumbled paragraph, jumbled essay, writing thesis statements and topic sentences, group drafting, quickwriting.
- iii) In the revising stage: peer feedback, group correction activities, rewriting exercises, teacher feedback.



Activity 3

Examine the main principles of each approach and state their advantages and disadvantages.

	The Product Approach	The Process Approach
Advantages	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
Disadvantages	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.

It seems that those approaches that focus on the process of writing are now considered to be more effective than the old-fashioned product approach, since they help the student develop a more conscious, communicative and realistic approach to writing. Besides, teachers can involve students much more in the activity, as most of the ideas used in the compositions come from the students themselves. Another important fact is that the process approach encourages students to work together in small groups on several writing tasks. Thus, the classroom becomes a writing workshop and individual students can benefit from the suggestions or corrections of the group.

However, there is no perfect approach to writing, and the product approach might also have some positive elements for students at lower levels. Therefore it is only common sense to use those ideas or techniques from both approaches when they work in our particular teaching context and our students learn from them.

5.3. Writing activities

When teachers plan their writing activities they have to consider the level of their students and the difficulty of the task. We could mention two different ways of grading writing tasks:

i) According to the length. Much of the writing tasks in an elementary level class is at the sentence level and their texts are usually limited to just a few sentences. Then, students gradually produce longer and more elaborate texts.

ii) According to the degree of control the task exercises over the student's expression. Writing tasks for beginners tend to be fairly controlled; as they progress and improve their writing, teachers often guide them in many different ways before they are asked to write something freely.

Hence, we can distinguish three types of writing activities: controlled, guided, and free. Below are some examples of writing exercises which illustrate these three types of tasks.

CONTROLLED WRITING ACTIVITIES:

Copying phrases or sentences which have been mastered orally or which are written in the book is an extreme example of a controlled writing activity. Students do not usually enjoy these mechanical exercises, and we wonder how effective this activity is to develop writing skills because meaning is not taken into account at all. It seems clear that we can make this type of activities much more meaningful if we make students think and understand what they are writing.

Copying

E.g. The following sentences are from reports to police by a witness regarding two suspects. The sentences have been mixed up by a secretary. Sort them out and write them under the appropriate picture.

He was about 40		
He was about 60	PICTURE 1	PICTURE 2
He was thin		
He was fat		
He had a beard	1.	1.
He had long hair	2.	2.
He was wearing glasses	3.	3.
He was wearing a hat	4.	4.

(Taken from Wingard, «Writing,» 1981)

Gap-filling

E.g. *Write out the complete sentences.*

Mary to school by bus.

or

Mary - school - bus

Re-ordering words or sentences.

E.g. *Write the sentences correctly.*

- Henry / with / a hole / had / in it / a bucket.
- He / to mend it / how / he didn't / wanted / but / know.
- He / Liza / for help / asked.
-

Substitution

E.g. *Write a true sentence like this about yourself.*

- Peter likes playing baseball and reading science fiction.
-
- Barbara can speak German.
-

Correct the facts

E.g. *Re-write the sentences so that they match the picture.*

At the market, I saw an old woman sitting in a chair. She was selling eggs. It was raining.

WRONG PICTURE

(Taken from Doff, *Teach English*, 1988)

Caption writing

E.g. *Look at the picture and write four sentences about what the people in the picture are doing.*

PICTURE

1. -----
2. -----

3. -----
4. -----

Substitution table

E.g. *Write three sentences in the appropriate sequence.*

They	met	to New York
Peter	went	at a restaurant
He	ate	Peggy

1. -----
2. -----
3. -----

Open dialogues

E.g. *Fill in the dialogue.*

A: Hello, Sue. Well, this is a surprise.

B: . . .

A: Yes, it must be five years. What are you doing these days?

B: . . .

A: Oh, so you don't work at the University any more then.

B: . . .

Conversion

E.g. *Rewrite using IF in each sentence.*

- Nick arrived late because he missed the train.
- . . .
- His boss was angry because he arrived late.
- . . .

Sentence completion

E.g. *Complete the sentences adding «because» and an appropriate reason.*

- A book was lying on the floor of an empty gym . . .
- I've worked hard at the office . . .
- This will be the most exciting match of the year . . .

Dictation

The traditional dictation might be adequate for practising spelling, but it does not really develop other writing skills, since students do not have to think much about what they are writing or find ways of making up sentences. Adrian Doff in the thirteenth chapter of his training course *Teach English* suggests an alternative to this traditional dictation, which focusses more on meaning. This activity has four steps:

i) Write these prompts on the board:

Giovanni- fishing
friend's house - bus - river
tree - fishing
a few minutes - Giovanni - small fish

ii) Read the text. Ask students to listen but not to write anything.

Giovanni decided to spend the day fishing. He went to his friend's house and they took a bus to the river. There, they sat down under a tree and began fishing. After a few minutes, Giovanni caught a small fish.

iii) Ask students to write a version of the text, using the prompts on the board. It does not have to be exactly the same as the original; the first sentence could be, e.g. «Giovanni decided to go fishing.»

iv) Go through the exercise orally, asking different students to read out sentences.

GUIDED WRITING ACTIVITIES:

There are two basic ways of guiding the students' writing:

- By providing students with short reading texts or oral passages which serve as models for them to follow, as the product approach suggested.

- By doing some oral or written preparation for the writing beforehand with the whole class, as the process approach suggested.

- a) Writing based on a model:

Parallel writing

E.g. *Read the following paragraph about Mary's day and write a similar one about your own day.*

or

Read the following description of a room and write a paragraph describing the room in the picture.

Summarising

E.g. *Read the following text, find out what the main ideas are and write them in your own words.*

This activity could be planned as a group composition:

i) Divide the class in groups of about 5 students.

ii) Divide the reading passage (a story or dialogue) in different sections.

- iii) Give each member of the group a different section of the reading passage and ask them to write a summary.
- iv) The group puts the individual summaries together and discusses the right order of the ideas.

Answering questions

E.g. *Answer the following questions and write a paragraph.*

- What did you do for your holiday last year?
- Who did you go with?
- How did you go?
- Where did you stay?
- ...

Information transfer

E.g. *Listen to the curious anecdote that Liza tells and write an account of what happened.*

b) Oral/written preparation:

The teacher helps students to prepare the composition asking them for ideas or expressions and building up an outline on the board. Then students write it down individually or in groups using the previous data as a basis for their writing. See all the activities we mentioned above when we discussed the process approach.

Brainstorming

Students rapidly exchange information about a topic or about something they have selected to read.

Free association

Put the topic on the board. Students quickly say whatever words come to mind when they see the topic word.

Word mapping

The teacher writes a topic on the board and asks students to help him organise related words and concepts in clusters around the central topic.

Ranking activities

Students rank a set of features according to priorities.

Quickwriting

Students write as much as they can in a given time (e.g. 3 minutes) on a topic, without worrying about the form of what they write.

FREE WRITING ACTIVITIES:

The traditional composition in which the teacher asks the students to write about their own experiences (e.g. after holidays), narrate stories (e.g. a funny anecdote), or describe pictures, is a good example of a free writing task. All the help students may have is a title or the first/last sentence of the composition. It is not an overstatement to say that even advanced students find these activities rather difficult and frustrating, since they tend to make a lot of mistakes. That is the reason why some oral or written preparation in class during the planning stage might help them to tackle the problem with a different attitude. Here are some free writing activities, taken from Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (1983), which could be done following the above-mentioned principles and techniques of the process approach.

Describe and identify

Students write descriptions of people or places and the rest of the class or other groups have to guess who the people or places are.

- i) The teacher divides the class into two teams.
- ii) The students write a description of a famous person (or a member of the class) without mentioning that person's name.
- iii) A member of one of the teams read his/her description. If someone from the opposing team can identify the person the team scores a point. If not there is no score. The teacher may

take away a point from the team reading the description if a) the information about the person is wrong or misleading, or b) the English is totally indecipherable.

Story construction

Students write a fairy story in groups.

- i) Students are put into groups. Where possible, they should be of equal numbers.
- ii) On a piece of paper they write the following sentence: «Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess who lived in a large castle at the edge of a forest.»
- iii) The students are then instructed to continue the story by writing the next sentence.
- iv) Then they are told to give their piece of paper to the student on their left. They should now continue the (new) story they have in front of them by writing the next sentence. The procedure is repeated until the papers have gone round the group but one. The teacher then tells the students to write the concluding sentence.
- v) The stories are now turned to their originators. Students can read the resulting tales to the rest of the class.

Relaying instructions

Students write directions which other students have to follow.

- i) Students are told to write directions from the place where they are studying to some other place in the same town or city. They are told not to mention the destination by name.
- ii) They give their directions to a partner who has to guess what the destination is by following the direction.

Exchanging letters

Students write each other letters and then receive a reply. They could be letters of invitations, letters to the «agony column» of a magazine, complaining letters about goods they have bought after seeing an advertisement, or letters in which students apply for a job.

5.4. Assessing written work

As important as planning activities to help students develop their writing skills is assessing their written work. It is invaluable to both students, who can learn from their errors, and teachers, who can check the students' progress and identify specific problems. However, correcting written work is usually a time-consuming activity which teachers do not particularly enjoy doing.

Fairly controlled writing tasks (such as gap-filling, reordering, open dialogues, etc.) can easily be corrected orally in class - students can correct each other's work in pairs and then the whole class goes through the answers together. This type of correction not only reduces the teacher's workload, but it also involves students in the revision and editing of their own pieces of writing so that they can learn from their errors.

However, there are times when students have to write more freely in English and it is necessary to correct their work individually. Then, there seems to be no escape from the tedium of marking compositions. It is therefore necessary to plan a clear assessment programme of writing at the beginning of the academic year.



Activity 4

Think about how you assess the written work of one of your courses and try to answer the following questions.

- 1) How many guided or free compositions do your students write every term?
- 2) How many of these compositions are written individually and how many in groups?
- 3) How many pieces of writing do you assess orally in class?
- 4) How often do students correct each other's work?
- 5) How many compositions do you read and mark outside the class?
- 6) How much writing do you take into account for the mark at the end of the term?
- 7) How does writing contribute to this term mark?
- 8) What do you look for in these compositions?
(grammatical correctness, spelling, ideas, . . .)

9) Have you got a particular correction technique?

10) Do your students rewrite the compositions you have corrected?

Of all these questions the one that refers to the techniques of marking free compositions needs special attention. Though correcting written work can be a very subjective task, teachers should try to do it clearly, precisely, and effectively, that is to say, students should make sense of the corrections, understand the mark given, and learn from their errors.



Activity 5

Read the following composition written by a student, correct it and give a specific mark.

Means of transports nowadays is very importan because, very people have to go to work outside of your town and if all people caught them car, they couldn' t drive, because would have very car. However have public transport too. Then the traffic is less, allthoutg the traffic have problems yet.

The public transport is a from studied for this problems of traffic that are one more important actually.

Though each teacher may have a different correction technique, below are some helpful suggestions:

i) Mark positively. The teacher's corrections should not have a discouraging effect on students, so instead of deducting points for each mistake they have, we could respond positively to their strengths and reward them with what they have got right. Though at the end the result might be the same, the point of view is completely different. Besides, as Tricia Hedge states:

Ideally when marking any piece of work, ticks in the margin and commendations should provide a counterbalance to correction of «errors» in the script. (1988: 10)

ii) Design a specific and reliable correction system. Thus we need to decide:

- What aspects of writing will be taken into account (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.)
- What type of descriptors will be used (numbers, letters, words such as «excellent», «good», «fair», etc.)
- What criteria will be established to understand what each descriptor represents. These criteria could be arranged in holistic scales (general descriptions of writing ability) or analytic scales, which separate the aspects of writing into different units.

Example of holistic scale for writing ability:

- 5 Constructs grammatically correct sentences and phrases and shows full mastery of appropriate vocabulary. Text is organised coherently. Correct spelling at all times. Excellent content and presentation. Message wholly relevant.**
- 4 In general, grammatically correct sentences and phrases but some errors which do not effect understanding. Does not use appropriate vocabulary at all times. Some difficulties with organization of text. Some errors in spelling. Good content and presentation. Message mostly relevant.**
- 3 Grammatical errors and use of vocabulary affects understanding as does organization of text. Many errors in spelling. Satisfactory content and presentation. Message not always relevant.**
- 2 Text understood with difficulty due to inaccurate grammar and inappropriate use of vocabulary. Poor content and presentation. Message generally lacks relevancy.**
- 1 Impossible to understand text due to frequency of grammatical errors and incoherence of organization. Poor spelling. Message irrelevant.**

(Taken from Harris & McCann, *Assessment*, 1994)

Examples of analytic scale for writing ability:

	E X C E L L E N T	G O O D	A D E Q U A T E	I N A D E Q U A T E	W E A K
A) General development 1 Content 2 Organization 3 A sense of audience					
B) Specific components 4 Grammatical skills 5 Complexity of sentences 6 Use of vocabulary 7 Spelling 8 Punctuation 9 Presentation					

1 Organization of content (clarity, coherence, paragraphs)	20%
2 Range (grammatical structures, vocabulary)	15%
3 Complexity of sentence structure	15%
4 Accuracy of grammar, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation	30%
5 Fluency (feel for the language, appropriateness, use of idioms, etc.)	20%
	100%

(Adapted from Hedge, *Writing*, 1988)

iii) Mark selectively. When we find a lot of mistakes in a composition, it is a good idea - specially when we carry out informal assessment - to focus our attention on some particular aspects, such as basic grammatical mistakes or organization, and ignore the rest, otherwise students will see their page painted in red and feel discouraged. We can leave the other mistakes for another time.

iv) Use a clear correction code. In order to give feedback to students, teachers could create a system of abbreviations which they write in the margins of the composition to indicate the type of error detected, so that students can try to identify and correct them themselves later on in class. Some correction symbols could be the following:

- Sp = spelling mistake
- T = wrong tense
- Wo = word order
- Pr = prepositions
- L = linking
- V = vocabulary (inappropriate language)
- P = punctuation
- O = a word missing
- ? = unclear meaning
- Pa = paragraphs
- ...

If what we want to do is to assess the students' writing skills formally, that is to say, to include some writing activities in a test, we should think of the writing activities we have been doing in class and choose the right ones. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find the ideal test format for writing; each one has some advantages and disadvantages. Some might be easy to mark, but very difficult to set. Others might be more realistic and communicative, but only good for higher levels.



Activity 6

Which are the advantages and disadvantages of each test format for writing?

	Pros	Cons
Essay questions e.g. «Write about a day when everything went wrong»		
Guided writing Using pictures, notes, diagrams (giving ss some input of info)		
Punctuation (punctuating texts)		
Summary e.g. «Read the text and summarise it in 20 lines»		
Note taking e.g. «Read the text and write notes»		
Dictation e.g. «Listen and write down the text»		
Combined e.g. «Read the letter and write a reply»		

(Adapted from Harris and McCann, *Assessment*, 1994)

5.5. Self-assessment possibilities

We all know that it is not easy to assess and correct one's own written work, however we should encourage our students to get involved in the revision, editing, and correction of their own pieces of writing. Thus, marking compositions becomes the students' responsibility as well and a good way of improving their writing skills.



Activity 7

Look at the techniques for self-assessment and peer assessment below. Have you ever used any of them yourself? Have they been successful? Can you add other techniques?

Self-assessment:

1. When the teacher hands back written work students identify their mistakes and correct them.
2. The teacher and the students discuss and negotiate the criteria involved in assessment.
3. The teacher corrects the compositions but does not write a mark. The students get the compositions back and decide what the mark is following the criteria set beforehand.
4. Students work in groups and read, criticise, and proofread their own writing.
5. Students examine a set of questions that prepare them for revision activities.
6. . . .

Peer correction:

1. Students sit in pairs and read each other's work. They look for mistakes in each other's writing and attempt to correct them, giving a mark.
2. A group of students correct the writing done by another group.
3. In the case of group writing, if each student in the group writes a section, they exchange their pieces of writing with other members of the group and mark the draft for revision.
4. . . .

When we think of self-assessment we are basically thinking of how we can help students become aware of the way they are learning, their problems and needs. Therefore, a questionnaire which makes them consider their writing process is a good tool in the hands of the teacher. Below is an example of a questionnaire that prepares students for revision activities.

- In composing your draft, what was the biggest problem you experienced?
- If the teacher were to read your paper right now, what would be the first thing the teacher would say about it?
- If the teacher were going to say something really nice about your draft, what would it be?
- Write a criticism of your draft. Imagine that your draft is in the hands of a critical English teacher. What would the teacher write?
- On the basis of the comments you've already received from your teacher, or your classmates, what changes do you intend to make when rewriting?
- List three important details in your paper.
- Look at your opening sentence. On a scale from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), what score would you give it?
- If you had something to add to this paper, what would it be?
- If you had to cut something, what would it be?
- What do you need to do to your paper between now and the day it's due? How long will it take?

(Taken from Whitlock, 1984)

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